

# Congo, Republic of (Brazzaville)

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## Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press is recognized by the Republic of Congo's 2002 constitution and laws, but is somewhat restricted in practice. A 2001 law made Congo Republic one of the first African countries to decriminalize libel. However, certain types of speech, such as inciting violence or ethnic hatred, are criminalized and carry the potential for prison sentences as well as monetary penalties. Such charges are rarely brought against individual journalists, and no cases were reported in 2013.

Although the constitution guarantees access to information, there is no implementing legislation, nor is there a specific law mandating public access to official information. In practice, officials often delay releasing information.

The government retains the right to revoke the accreditation of journalists at government and foreign-owned media outlets if their reporting reflects badly on the image of the government, ruling party, or its leaders. Media outlets are required to be registered with the High Council on Freedom of Communication (CSLC), whose 11 members are appointed by the president. In practice, only a small percentage of print and broadcast outlets are formally registered, though the vast majority operate unhindered.

The CSLC is also charged with issuing censorship orders, and appears to have taken its role more seriously since the appointment of a new president, former minister of energy Philippe Mwoué, in June 2012. Within three months, two newspapers faced bans of nine months and six months, respectively. In June 2013, the CSLC suspended three independent Brazzaville-based newspapers, *L'Observateur*, *Talassa*, and *Le Trottoir*, for four months after the papers republished what it called a "seditious" article from the French publication *Afrique Education*. The article accused Congolese president Denis Sassou-Nguesso of being complicit in the 1977 assassination of former president Marien Ngouabi, something Sassou-Nguesso, who became president two years later, has repeatedly denied. A CSLC official said the three newspapers were accused of "disseminating false news," "inciting violence and divisions," and "defaming... certain state officials." The regulatory body also imposed a two-month suspension on independent weekly *Le Glaive* for its investigation into the issuance of diplomatic passports by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The paper had already received a six-month suspension after writing a series of articles critical of the CSLC. In November 2013, the CSLC announced another round of circulation suspensions for nine months each for three weeklies. The papers affected once again included *Le Glaive*, this time for an October opinion piece that used the word "cancre" (French for "dunce") to describe Sassou-Nguesso's nephew Serge Bouya, whom the president appointed as deputy director general of the port of Pointe Noire, the country's economic capital and center of its oil industry. In addition, *La Voix du Peuple* was accused of "insulting the army corps" for an article critical of the military, and the satirical journal *Sel-Piment* was accused of publishing a "defamatory" article entitled "Here's How the National Police Kill the Congolese."

The potential for legal action, censorship, and the revocation of credentials leads many journalists, particularly at state-run outlets, to practice self-censorship. Physical attacks against journalists are unusual, but reporters do occasionally face intimidation and threats. The 2009 death of journalist and activist Bruno Jacquet-Ossébi, who had been reporting on corruption and embezzlement, is still unexplained. Jacquet-Ossébi was badly burned in a mysterious house fire, and was reportedly recovering in a Brazzaville hospital before suddenly dying 12 days after he was admitted.

There is one daily newspaper, the government-run *La Nouvelle République*, which has a circulation of about 5,000. More than 100 private print publications, whose circulations are generally quite low and are not distributed widely beyond the main cities, can be critical of the government up to a point, and on occasion publish letters from opposition leaders and cover corruption allegations.

Most Congolese get their news from television and radio. There are some 60 radio stations in Congo, and about two dozen television stations; of these, none have nationwide reach. The majority of these are privately owned, often by government officials and their relatives, and often lack financial stability. The main private broadcast company, DRTV, was founded after the government opened up the media to more competition in 2001, and currently owns a radio station and two television stations. Rebroadcasts from the British Broadcasting Corporation, Radio France Internationale, and Voice of America are also available.

There are no controls on internet use and satellite television, but only about 7 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2013. Connectivity is expected to improve following the arrival of the submarine fiber-optic West Africa Cable System project in 2012. Consumption of internet-based news and use of social media is increasing, particularly among the youth and in urban areas.

## **2014 Scores**

### **Press Status**

Partly Free

### **Press Freedom Score**

**(0 = best, 100 = worst)**

57

### **Legal Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

16

### **Political Environment**

**(0 = best, 40 = worst)**

24

### **Economic Environment**

**(0 = best, 30 = worst)**

17